

ARTICLE APPEARED
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13 FEBRUARY 1983*Jack Anderson*

Jew Against Jew

Reports from Israel have raised the possibility that President Yitzhak Navon will challenge Prime Minister Menachem Begin for the country's political leadership.

The reason for such a confrontation is not generally understood in the West. A secret State Department analysis suggests Navon's challenge reflects the division between Israelis of European background, like Begin, and those with roots in Asia and Africa, like Navon.

In late December, an outbreak of violence in Tel Aviv slums alerted U.S. intelligence to the potentially volatile split. It brought into the open the resentment of the Sephardic, or "oriental" Jewish community, economically depressed and underrepresented even though it constitutes a solid majority of Israel's population.

The flare-up in Tel Aviv is cited as evidence of the explosive potential of the division between the Sephardic population and the Ashkenazi, or European Jews. It began when a Sephardic family of 19 built an addition to their tiny three-room slum home without the appropriate permit.

While the family patriarch was in court arguing for a permit that would legalize the addition, police bulldozed that part of the building, under a hail of stones and bottles from the family on the rooftop. One son pulled out a gun and fired—whether in warning or at the police has not been established.

In the melee, the Sephardic youth was shot and killed. Violence spread, with Sephardic Jews accusing the Ashkenazim of being oppressors and murderers. The mayor of Tel Aviv was threatened; graffiti, including swastikas, appeared in the wealthy Ashkenazi sections of the city.

When the Sephardic Jews began flooding Israel in the early 1950s, having been ejected from the Moslem countries where they had survived for centuries, the dominant Ashkenazis tried to integrate the mostly poor and unskilled arrivals into the new Jewish state. But the Sephardim saw these attempts as a threat to their cherished cultural heritage, and for the most part resisted.

Over the past 30 years, the Sephardim, committed by tradition to large families, emerged as the majority.

They now constitute 60 percent of Israel's population.

But the Sephardim have yet to achieve political and economic power commensurate with their numbers. The average standard of living for Sephardim is only half that of Ashkenazis. Ninety percent of Israel's slums are inhabited by Sephardim. Fewer than 20 percent of university students and civil servants are Sephardic.

Begin has managed to retain the support of the majority of the Sephardim, having capitalized on their ultranationalism and years of discontent with the secular Labor Party. But there is serious doubt he could keep their loyalty if one of their own—Navon—decided to run against him for prime minister.

CIA sources told my associate, Dale Van Atta, they don't think Navon will become Israel's first Sephardic prime minister. But they think it's quite possible he could prove to be the spoiler, knocking out Begin and opening the way for a Labor Party candidate, like former defense minister Ezer Weizman, to become prime minister.

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